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## An Introduction to Conducting Area Studies Classes for EFL Students

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### Abstract

Area Studies has been increasing in popularity for decades as the need to understand unfamiliar parts of the world during a period of globalization has become more important. This paper will summarize Area Studies' roots in the colonial and cold war eras. It will look at its place in the modern educational landscape, how it has and is being conducted all over the world and its connection to EFL learning. It also will briefly touch on student careers that could be supported by Area Studies. And finally how Area Studies can be used in the EFL curriculum will be explored with some practical examples for teachers.

**Key words:** Area Studies, CLIL, PBL, CBI, EMI

### Introduction

Many EFL teachers will have heard of Area Studies but have little background in this area of education before being asked to teach this kind of course. This paper will introduce the basic idea behind Area Studies, where it came from and how it developed, and finally what sort of activities and projects are suitable to be adapted to use with EFL students.

### What is Area Studies?

The short answer to the question is: Area Studies is the multi-disciplinary social research of a geographical or cultural area. However, as Slavonic scholar Lesley Pitman noted, "There is no single, widely understood definition, and the nature of

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area studies is in itself the subject of considerable academic discussion and some controversy.” (Pitman, 2015) In addition this paper will also deal with the students being EFL learners so the definition of Area Studies adopted will be the most traditional one available with the biggest consensus.

Area Studies (sometimes also called Regional Studies) looks to find and explain the uniqueness of an area. Find surprising similarities and differences between the area being studied and the student’s home area. It looks at social relationships in the area between individuals, groups, and organizations. It also often looks at change over time in the region. To do this the student and researcher must synthesize information from a variety of sources both primary and secondary. Traditionally the focus is mainly on the social sciences and the humanities but any academic discipline can potentially be incorporated into understanding an area. Technically Area Studies focuses on “other” areas and so domestic area studies does not exist. However, of course there is some room for domestic scholars to contribute to the field that includes their own country.

Area Studies, besides its inherent interest and value, can also help students in their future careers. Careers often cited as being helped by the possession of Area Studies knowledge are business, banking, tourism, transportation, diplomacy, military, publishing, immigration, and foreign trade. The value comes from two areas: local knowledge to interact efficiently with people and organizations from the target region and secondly the independent academic skills that can have a wide application. Students in Area Studies classes often do a significant amount of research, presentation, and writing as well as gaining knowledge of the area they are studying.

### **Traditional Major Area Studies Groupings**

(North) American Studies

Latin American Studies

African Studies

Middle Eastern Studies

East Asian Studies

Central Asian Studies

South Asian Studies

South East Asian Studies

European Studies

Pacific Studies

### **Where did Area Studies Originate?**

Originally the field of study we call Area Studies first emerged in 18<sup>th</sup> century

European colonial powers. As colonization expanded the colonizing countries found they needed more staff with local knowledge to do the work needed. This included private as well as public organizations including diplomats, colonial administrators, military officers, commercial company staff, and staff from perceived civilizing activities like missionaries. Small groups of scholars started to collect information to teach to staff to be sent abroad.

In America, Area Studies first emerged after World War one when American officials realized there were much more involved in the world than in the past and were engaged in numerous colonial endeavors themselves. However, it was after World War Two and the start of the Cold War that saw America really embrace Area Studies. America had become a true global superpower and needed the human resources to manage and influence assets all over the world. As the USSR and the USA were competing for influence in all corners of the world the urgency was at a level never seen before and Area Studies programs greatly expanded to fill this need.

There was another bump in American and western interest in Area Studies after 9/11. Many in the media, intelligence services, and state department felt they had been in the dark and it was due to a low level of human resources with the area knowledge of the Middle East to keep on top of threats. In addition to the usual needs of private and public organizations to understand what was going on in the Islamic world, there were of course two large wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that required many more personnel with local area knowledge than were available and this put the inadequacy of American Area Studies into focus. Many of the early failures of the American efforts in the Middle East after 9/11 have been attributed to the lack of appropriately trained staff with critical language and cultural skills. (Hinnebusche, 2007)

There has been considerable criticism of traditional Area Studies and its focus on western ideals and perspectives on other areas of the world. In many ways Area Studies was tainted by the imperialist ideals of the previous era and needed to change. The catalyst for much of the change started with a book by Edward Said titled *Orientalism*. (Said, 1978) Said felt the representations of the east in western scholarship was inaccurate, patronizing and even racist. He further felt much of the scholarship was severely suspect as it was a servant to the powers that created and maintained colonialism and imperialism. Today's Area Studies often emphasize how history and power can distort our assumptions about the "other" and that overcoming this problem is the key to a deeper understanding of an interconnected and interdependent world.

Despite an overall decrease in funding in the post-cold war era from large government agencies there has been a steady interest in Area Studies as part of the

globalization movement. With the improvement of transportation and ICT technologies the world has become ever more interconnected and more and more people are having to understand and interact with people from different cultures and areas of the world. Area Studies investigates an interdependent whole rather than unconnected fragments arbitrarily labeled history or politics or language or economics and is well placed to aid in global understanding. (Prewitt, 1982) In fact, Area Studies has evolved into a discipline that seeks to understand complex interactions among different spheres of life in a region. Then taking that explanation, derived from a wide variety of disciplines, and explain the regions place and role in international society. (Duroselle, 1952) Reflecting on Prewitt and Duroselle's traditional definitions and the realities of the world today it seems clear Area Studies will not only not disappear, it is likely to adapt and grow to fit into the new global environment in ways that the traditional disciplines will have a hard time matching.

In the Japanese context, the Japanese government Education ministry (MEXT) has been promoting internationalism, global citizenship, and civic engagement for some time. The ministry publishes English Education guidelines periodically to shape the English curriculum across the educational system. Over time the focus on internationalization and global citizenship has increased. The most recent version is the "English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization" timed to coincide with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. (MEXT, 2018) The focus is not only on international understanding but also on promoting a sense of Japanese identity and its unique position in the world. First helping students understand how they fit in with and contribute to their own society and then expanding that circle of influence and connectedness to the rest of the world.

### **Area Studies Connection to Language Learning**

One of the most important skills of Area Studies specialists is foreign languages. Students in Area Studies programs are usually required to attain at least a moderate level of at least one foreign language. Graduate students and researchers need advanced language skills to access research data from their original sources. However, many undergraduates do not have the necessary foreign language skills to study the area content in the language of the area and must do so in their native language. In Japan this is usually the case but some students are capable enough in English to attempt to study about the English-speaking world in English. Students can learn content and improve their language skills at the same time but often need sheltered, supported, or scaffolded materials and teaching. The largest area of scholarship to aid teachers for these classes is from the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) literature. Other EFL connected areas of study are CBI (Content

Based Instruction), Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Project Based Learning (PBL).

The CLIL literature has the most relevance for teaching EFL students Area Studies and the source of the most helpful materials. CLIL is a term coined by David Marsh in 1994 in the European context but has certainly been used in one form or another in other contexts in the past. Integrated, the I in CLIL, refers to the dual goals of content learning and language learning. From the perspective of language learning, the language learned in context is more likely to involve deep learning and be able to be integrated into the learner's interlanguage and recalled later. In addition, learning in context is much more motivating for the learner than any variation of rote or drill based decontextualized learning. Do Coyle asserted that CLIL lessons would include the 4 Cs of Curriculum, Communication, Cognition, and Culture. (Coyle, 1999) In addition they would ideally also include all 4 language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Lesson are often focused on a reading or listening text with any language taught being functional to understand the text and follow up tasks centered on the learner reproducing and reflecting on the text in their own words.

### Activities and Projects

Teaching Area Studies to EFL students will of course draw upon the various Area Studies literature on both content and pedagogy but in addition it will utilize techniques and materials more from the EFL side of the equation, specifically the CLIL literature mentioned above will serve as a guide for developing materials. The level of the students' language skills and prior knowledge of the subject area will of course influence the teacher's preparations. Ideally the course will connect back to previously learned material in their L1 and expand from there. Within a class there will often be a need to provide differentiation between students in the input received, tasks assigned, and support given. Although publishers are increasing the amount of content-based materials produced for EFL learners, teachers will often have to make or adapt materials intended for native speakers.

A variety of scaffolding and supports to help students understand input are available to the teacher. In order of popularity in my content classes they are: **1) Teacher explanation.** This was by far the most common student response with the caveat that students preferred teachers to explain difficult content and vocabulary in simple easy to understand English. **2) Translation.** Although teachers may be concerned about overuse of this method, students said bilingual glossaries, bilingual word lists, and translation software greatly enhanced their understanding of the material and their ability to do the follow up tasks. **3) Collaboration.** Students said

when they did not understand other group members often could help them or they could figure it out together. **4) Visuals.** Students said video, photos, diagrams, and maps helped them understand when the language level was difficult. **5) IT resources.** Students said using Google and other online resources to look up different sources about the target content help them refine their understanding. **6) Word lists.** Students said teacher provided word lists, especially bilingual, helped them understand the material both as they worked on the course material and later when they were consolidating their knowledge in the assessment phase of the class.

From the instructor it is important to pay attention to the emotional reactions of the students to the material to best support them for success. Some important techniques to keep in mind are: **1) Create a safe learning environment.** Students should feel free to make mistakes, not understand, and ask questions. **2) Provide initial language support.** The teacher should use the L2 but provide clear explanations and visuals to aid in understanding. **3) Repetition.** The teacher and the materials should utilize key new language as many times as possible. **4) Break the materials into chunks.** Don't overwhelm the students with walls of text or long listening sessions. Break the material up into manageable chunks. **5) Highlight.** Point out the most important and relevant language and information to focus finite student energy. **6) Give students individual time.** Students need to engage with the material and possible use ICT supports. **7) Give students group time.** Students need time in small groups to negotiate what they do and do not understand and formulate questions for the teacher if necessary.

Area Studies tasks to engage with teacher provided input varies widely. Most are familiar EFL activities but there are also some that more rarely occur. **1) Note taking.** Many teachers start Area Studies classes off with a listening or reading text to provide background to the topic. Note taking skills can be developed as homework as well as in class. **2) Vocabulary Learning.** Students match images, definitions, or translations to content vocabulary as a preview, main task, or review. **3) Create visuals.** Students create visual materials such as mind maps, posters, or power points to show develop and show their understanding. **4) Writing.** Students produce texts explaining the target material or topic. The length and complexity depends on student level of course. **5) Public artifacts.** Students produce text, video, audio or images for public consumption. This could take the form of a blog, vlog, podcast, Facebook page etc. **6) Presentation.** Students explain the target topic to the rest of the class, usually with visual aids such as posters, power point slides, Pecha Kucha slides etc.

Creating tasks are a good chance to for teachers to show creativity in task design. One avenue of inspiration is Bloom's Taxonomy. The most recent version is the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy published in 2001 and is more teacher friendly due

to its popularity for curriculum development in a wide variety of fields. (Anderson, 2001) The taxonomy is divided into three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The cognitive domain is broken down into 6 sub-domains: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Each sub-domain has a list of action verbs that can serve as the learning objective of a class or activity. Another good guide to aid task and activity construction for teachers is Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. (Gardner, 2001) Like Bloom's Taxonomy Gardner's theory can help teachers with both inspiration for task creation and to remind teachers to cover the content material in different modalities. Courses excessively focused on one modality may miss out many opportunities for learning. Area Studies has potential to access the other modes of learning beyond those used in the usual listening and reading tasks. According to Toni Noble using Bloom's Taxonomy and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences together can help curriculum development. (Noble, 2004)

Due to the dual nature of Area Studies in EFL contexts and other CLIL educational activities, assessment can be difficult and complex. Do both the content and the language need to be tested? Does one take precedent? How can they be separated? (Kiely, 2009) Area Studies taught as part of a general language course would naturally focus on testing language skill gains whereas dedicated Area Studies classes are much more likely to expect the content to be the focus of testing. Although testing for measurement might be required for the school administration, testing for content seems more appropriate. As classes progress teachers can do formative assessment such as check learning journals or logs, monitor discussions, and other low stakes evaluations. For summative assessments teachers can evaluate portfolios of work or a final project such as a presentation or a creation of an educational artifact.

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to serve as a short article to introduce the teaching of Area Studies to EFL students. Area Studies has a history of over 150 years but it very relevant to the increasingly globalized world today. Area Studies can help students entering international careers and at the same time help their language skills and other academic skills. EFL teachers will find lots of inspiration and ideas in the traditional Area Studies literature but more practical classroom activities will more likely be found in the CLIL and CBI literature.



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